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*Probing for some profit from
a past mistake.*

THE MISSILES IN CUBA

J. J. Rumpelmayer

Mr. Sherman Kent's thoughtful review¹ of the USIB's mistaken estimate of 19 September 1962 and his explanation for its conclusion that the Soviets would be unlikely to install strategic missiles on Cuba leave the clandestine collector—who must necessarily be at the same time something of an analyst and estimator—with two kinds of reservation involving principles which will remain of importance in the future work of the community. The first is an alternative reconstruction of the Soviet attitude toward the opportunity and hazards of this move, and by extension toward any future such opportunity and aggressive moves in general. Here we are clearly intruding into the professional estimators' business, but a fresh view from outside their circle may be of use to them. The second is a matter close to the collector's heart—recognition of the quality of his information and the putting it to proper use.

The Soviet Position

Mr. Kent's central point is that the Soviet leaders, unexpectedly misjudging the severity of the potential U.S. reaction, made a serious mistake in trying to put the missiles in. He writes:

On 15 October [when the missiles were identified in U-2 photographs] we realized that our estimate of the Soviets' understanding of the mood of the United States and its probable reaction was wrong. On 28 October [when Khrushchev agreed to withdraw them] we realized that the Soviets had realized that they had misjudged the United States.

We submit that neither the U.S. estimate of the Soviet view of U.S. reaction nor that Soviet view need have been wrong. On the contrary, there is evidence that the Soviets did show, as the estimate put it, "a far greater willingness to increase the level of risk in U.S.-Soviet relations than the USSR has displayed thus far"—because the stakes were higher than ever before—but were prepared to back down if caught.

¹"A Crucial Estimate Relived," *Studies* VIII 2, p. 1 ff.

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Missiles in Cuba

A large democratic country like the United States cannot take an adventurous position in foreign affairs if only because of the heavy inertial factor which makes it so difficult to generate a program of foreign action or, once having mounted one, to call it off. The Soviets, not needing to worry about this inertial factor, can with minimal hazard to political integrity undertake a desired course as a mere probing action.

An indication that they were prepared to pull out of Cuba if detected lies in the promptness with which they executed the disengagement operation as soon as they were convinced that the United States was ready to act. They recalled to Soviet ports all vessels suitable for missile loadings and began unloading the missiles without even waiting for the blockade to be put into effect, evidently acting on a contingency plan they would presumably not have had ready if they had really underestimated the probable U.S. reaction.

The alternative explanation, then, which "might lessen the chances of our misestimating the Soviets in a future case," is that they judged the United States correctly but were not taking irrevocable action and considered the possibility of a radical improvement in their strategic posture worth the risk involved in a probe.

The Soviet Decision

Turning now to the quality of the reporting, we note Mr. Kent's statement:

There was of course no information that the Soviets had decided to deploy strategic missiles to Cuba and indeed no indication suggesting such a decision.

There was doubtless no firm information or verified indication, but there were reports first hinting at and finally almost spelling out such a decision. Consider the following series from the network of a single clandestine source on the island disseminated between 5 July and 6 October.

5 July: Cuban CP member describes NATO as a belt of bases surrounding the Soviet Union and says that in September Cuba is going to be the buckle in this belt. (Speaker is livid and uses very authoritative tone.)^a

13 July: Close associate of Che Guevara says "he" [possibly Fidel] has desperate plan to ask the Soviet Union to locate in Cuba an atomic base which would be like a buckle in the belt of bases surrounding the USSR.^a

^a TDCS-3/515,834, paragraph 5.

^a TDCS-3/516,558.

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- 13 July: Guevara, still very worried, had no recourse but to send Raul Castro to Soviets to find out what aid Cuba can count on. Guevara, a Stalinist and friend of Mao, does not have confidence in the Soviets but knows that Cuba has extraordinary value for the Bloc. Before making any decision he wants to know all the possibilities.⁴
- 23 August: Soviet ships unloaded at Mariel large quantity of prefabricated concrete forms, some tubular five meters wide and others semicircular three by ten meters and six inches thick.⁵
- 5 September: In mid-July Soviet ships received orders to speed up loading and unloading and leave Cuba quickly.⁶
- 7 September: Son of Cuban CP president says certain officer had accompanied Guevara on recent trip to Moscow because he served as liaison officer on "rocket project."⁷
- 20 September: Fidel's personal pilot says, "We have . . . [in addition to 40-mile rockets and a radar system] many mobile ramps for intermediate-range rockets. They don't know what is in store for them."⁸
- 21 September: Cuban war plans chief says, "We will fight to the death and perhaps we can win because we have everything including atomic weapons. . . . 1000 Soviet technicians are working day and night to build the nuclear weapons base."⁹
- 6 October: The Cubans, having the buckle to the belt of atomic bases surrounding the Soviet Union, can loose the belt and save the USSR from strangulation.¹⁰

Note that the viewpoint in the belt-and-buckle metaphor is Soviet: it is the USSR that is to be saved; the enemy is NATO, not Yankee imperialism. These ideas of Soviet origin were reflected in the subsequent proposals to trade the Cuban foothold for Turkish bases. It is true that the unequivocal spelling out of the meaning in the last of these reports was much too late for the crucial estimate, but it still came more than a week ahead of the photographic evidence that was regarded as decisive.

It is not that these reports were lost in the mass of intelligence information coming in; they were brought to the particular attention of the analysts. It must be simply that they were not taken seriously enough. We know by hindsight, both from the confirmation of their

⁴ TDCS-3/516,555.

⁵ TDCS-3/520,583, paragraph 3.

⁶ CS-3/521,533.

⁷ TDCS-3/521-936.

⁸ TDCS-3/522,948.

⁹ TDCS-3/523,169.

¹⁰ TDCS-3/524,449.

main purport and from intensive debriefing and testing of the source, that he was giving us strategically important information with no concoction or exaggeration. The failure of the warning function was not in the observing or reporting but in interpretation. The problem is one of how to get the right valuation put on this kind of material when it comes in.

Signs of Deployment

With respect to "evidence that the missiles were in fact moving to their emplacement" Mr. Kent writes:

With the benefit of hindsight one can go back over the thousand and more bits of information collected from human observers in the six months ending 14 October and pick out a few—a very few—which indicated the possible presence of strategic missiles.

Certainly they were comparatively few, but when you actually read them they seem more impressive than when you just count them. We sample in the abstracts below a half-dozen disseminated before the date of the estimate and four others put out before photography at last convinced the analysts.

- 10 August: Describing the exceedingly secure unloading of a Soviet ship at Mariel on 1 August, source says that trucks unloaded with extreme care probably carried rockets, nose cones, or most probably atomic bombs.¹²
- 24 August: On 5 August about 2000 Soviets arrived at Casilda with long and short range rockets, construction equipment, and extremely large tanks. By 9 August a total of five ships had arrived at Casilda.¹³
- 31 August: Since mid-August no unauthorized personnel have been allowed at the Mariel docks. A 12-ft. concrete wall was built around the port in less than 24 hours. Among cargo unloaded were prefabricated concrete blocks two by four meters by a foot thick with special hooks or metal bases on the ends. These are welded together and cement poured between sections to form platforms for rocket launch pads. Rockets 40 feet long and 3 feet in diameter have also been offloaded.¹⁴ [Note that the blocks described had been designated one of the specific indicators for ballistic missiles of medium or longer range.]

¹² TDCS-3/519,345.

¹³ TDCS-DB-3/651,139.

¹⁴ TDCS-DB-3/651,223.

- 31 August: Source saw in military area [later verified as MRBM site] a truck loaded with a fifty-foot-long rig that looked like a launcher. On the ground nearby were more than a dozen dark metal cylinders 30 feet long and 18 to 20 inches across."⁴
- 18 September: Source observed at certain location [later verified as MRBM site] a larger Soviet-guarded perimeter than had ever before been established."⁵
- 18 September: In early August a chauffeur for Soviet military technicians constructing a missile base at Monte de Soroa saw two very large missiles being transported there."⁶
- 21 September: During wee hours 12 September source saw two-axle trailers 65-70 feet long being pulled west toward Campo Libertad, believes canvas-covered loads projecting over ends were large missiles."⁷
- 23 September: Source saw on Port Isabella docks 20 metal cylinders 45-50 feet long by about five feet in diameter. Later these were hauled away on trailer-trucks."⁸
- 1 October: In mid-September source saw two cylindrical objects 40 feet long by three feet in diameter loaded on each of six semi-trailers."⁹
- 12 October: Ultimate source declared about 20 September, "Cuba now has a Soviet missile with a range of about 600 miles."¹⁰

These are the kind of reports which, perhaps out of skepticism regarding the capabilities of human observation, were set aside in the absence of confirming photographic evidence.

Majority Rule

Although Mr. Kent did not intend the implication and would deplore it, it is an infelicitous fact that many of his expressions and metaphors tend to imply that intelligence conclusions are controlled by numbers of reports rather than the quality of individual reports:

Aggregate meaning of the information . . .
A plethora of raw intelligence . . .
So large a volume of data . . .
The quantity evaluated . . .
Still a formidable amount of paper . . .
We weighed and measured . . .

⁴ OOK-3/218,381.

⁵ TDCS-3/522,702.

⁶ OOK-3/218,886.

⁷ OOK-3/219,040.

⁸ OOK-3/236,675.

⁹ OOK-3/219,189.

¹⁰ TDCS-3/525,154, first line.

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Missiles in Cuba

A few—a very few . . .

A handful . . .

The list comes to eight . . .

No more than two or possibly three should have stopped the clock . . .

Three bits of evidence would probably not, taken in the context of the other thousands . . .

This quantitative approach would explain how the needle of a key strategic report might be smothered and lost under the haystack of a mass of other information; but it is not an explanation that we can resignedly accept and live with. It is diametrically opposed to a basic doctrine of the clandestine collector—that the ideal item of intelligence is a single nugget of great worth recognized and pulled out of the general mass of indifferent information. Certainly that is the concept under which the collecting is done.

Perhaps our problem is a peculiarly American one, paralleling our faith in government by a consensus of the majority and our belief in the intrinsic desirability of mass production. Perhaps, as suggested above, it comes from having more confidence in machines than human observation. The clandestine operator is prepared to fight for the recognition of his rare nuggets against the tons of dross, but he needs help from the analyst in pinpointing where the trouble lies. If we are to learn from our historical mistakes and so be saved from repeating them, this problem must be solved. The writer feels there are solutions to be found.

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